

To Remember Balagopal Is to Remember Our Own Humanness

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To Remember Balagopal Is to Remember Our Own Humanness

M KODANDARAM

To remember K Balagopal now is only to remember our own humanness and the conditions under which we struggle for a better life for everyone.

A tribute by a friend who also worked alongside Balagopal for close to three decades, from the early days of the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee and through his subsequent reflections which led to the formation of the Human Rights Forum.

To remember K Balagopal is to reflect on 30 years of Andhra Pradesh history. During this period, Balagopal devoted his life to fighting the battle for democratic rights on several fronts. These battles were not merely external for him. Whether in reaching support to the poor, withstanding assaults by the police and communal forces or in theorising democratic practice, Balagopal crafted himself into a moral compass to the rights movement in Andhra Pradesh. He waged a struggle with single-minded devotion to integrate democratic values into his personal conduct on a daily basis. It is this unity of public purpose and personal quest in his work that will be sorely missed by us.

This journey of Balagopal began in Warangal Regional Engineering College (REC) where he was a student of MSc in mathematics after getting a bachelors degree in Tirupati. He went on to complete his PhD in Warangal. The Radical Students Union (RSU) was already formed under the leadership of Surapaneni Janardhan when Balagopal enrolled as a student in Warangal. The RSU under Surapaneni's leadership organised not only students but also the canteen workers, and the people in the villages around REC. Surapaneni was arrested and shot dead by the police in the Girayapalli encounter during the Emergency.

Balagopal observed the activities of the RSU keenly. He was surprised by how students gave up their lives for their convictions. Prompted by these first-hand observations, Balagopal turned to philosophical investigations and learnt to analyse society around him. Balagopal was still a student when the Emergency was lifted and the country was awash with a new democratic spirit with Jayaprakash Narayan as its iconic face.

Revelations about the atrocities committed by the government during the

Emergency came as an eye-opener for people in all walks of life who had until then believed that the Indian democracy was intact. It was the moment when the idea that without a strong anti-ruling class mobilisation, Indian democracy itself is at risk took roots. The Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee (APCLC) was one of the many organisations which took on the mantle of building such a strong anti-state spirit. Balagopal joined the APCLC in 1981. He became general secretary in 1983.

Working with APCLC

At the time Balagopal joined the APCLC, the organisation did not have an extensive membership base or continuous work practice. Civil liberties activists would go for fact-finding whenever reports of violation of rights were reported. This fact-finding work was facilitated by mass organisations. After the fact-finding committee finalised its report, the APCLC would issue a statement condemning the incident. In other words, APCLC depended on other organisations for its work. Balagopal worked hard to change this situation after he became general secretary. He insisted that from arranging the podium to posting flyers, APCLC had to develop its own activists and resources to carry out all the work. As members, we used to go in the evening to distribute flyers and at night we went around the city on bicycles with buckets of adhesive made of wheat flour and stacks of posters to paste them on walls.

At that time working in civil liberties meant constant conflict with the police. Policemen simply did not believe that they were bound by the law. Their whims and fancies were to be taken as the law. People had to comply with their diktats without question. Thus, challenging the illegal arrests or condemning encounter killings meant directly challenging individual policemen who had arrogated to themselves enormous unregulated powers. In retrospect it seems that it was a combination of the political consciousness imbibed from the REC, the commitment that came from a philosophical perspective and plain personal stubbornness that saw him through those years.

Warangal was burning all the time with people's movements on the one hand and

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attacks by the police on the other. Balagopal worked relentlessly, constituting fact-finding committees and bringing the truth to light. We used to speak with the people, gather information and write meticulous reports. It is this systematic and continuous work that gave Balagopal a grip over the social and economic conditions of Andhra Pradesh.

While his articles in English especially in EPW kept the outside world informed, Balagopal steered the organisation in Andhra Pradesh through years of severe repression. It was in part in order to respond to the repression that Balagopal gradually expanded the activities of APCLC to a diverse range of issues. He put into practice what had until then remained a conceptual framework – that the role of a civil liberties organisation should be to challenge repression and exploitation in all spheres. Under Balagopal's leadership, APCLC went beyond responding to attacks on Marxist-Leninists. It responded to every instance when people's rights were attacked: from lock-up deaths to environmental pollution, to famine and farmers' suicides. APCLC investigated every issue from a democratic rights perspective.

Painstaking Effort

Through its systematic campaigns, APCLC made it possible to demand "welfare" as a right. Even when APCLC investigated faction fights in Rayalaseema it was with a view to provide a framework for democratic reconstruction of the place and thereby spell out the tasks before civil society and the political establishment. Or when APCLC published a report on the basis of information gathered from courts on the attacks on women in their homes and outside, it was with a view to bring women's oppression into the public sphere. Balagopal was meticulous in writing and editing reports. He refused to accept reports that were factually incorrect or did not provide adequate evidence. It is this care that he took which earned him the unrivalled respect from human rights groups in this state.

Balagopal did not limit himself to fact-finding. He helped the victims access justice in many ways. When he filed a petition before the National Human

Rights Commission requesting it to investigate a sample of encounter killings, he took the trouble of presenting the victims before the body. This was not an easy task. He spent a long time persuading and giving confidence to the victims against fear of reprisals from the police. He met the victims in advance and prepared their affidavits, typed them and took their signatures and presented them before the commission. When the police and forest officials colluded to burn down the huts of tribal families in dozens of hamlets in Chintapalli in Visakhapatnam district in 1987, he constituted the Indian People's Tribunal with retired judges and brought the entire incident to light. His effort to bring the victims before the T L N Reddy Commission (constituted in 1989 to enquire into 47 cases of "missing" – i.e., abducted – people) are unforgettable. Even before he became a lawyer, he filed a number of petitions in court. He used to prepare the material for K G Kannabiran and other senior advocates to argue the cases. He used to go around government offices to get compensation for victims.

Against Communalism

From the very beginning in the APCLC, Balagopal worked hard to campaign against communalism. Religious fundamentalism

had a specific context in Warangal. On the one hand, people were fighting to break out of the power of the landlords and on the other, the children of the landlords were organising against these movements under the auspices of Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) – the student front of the Bharatiya Janata Party. These people were not simply opposed to Marxism – they were opposed to even democratic rights. The conflict between the rights activists and members of the ABVP used to play out in everyday contexts. Defending democratic rights meant challenging communal ideologies and politics. Balagopal was committed to this understanding and practice in opposition to communalism throughout his life. He wrote critical articles on fundamentalism, studied attacks on minorities and through his articles and speeches clarified the links between economic liberalism and communalism.

APCLC was not alone in diversifying its activities. Civil liberties organisations did this all over the country. But it was Balagopal who theorised and showed how and why the civil rights movement had its own autonomous field of activity. It is this autonomy both in theory and in practice that he established, which has ensured that the movement will be alive for a long time in Andhra Pradesh. It is

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not without reason that Balagopal wanted to theorise the practice of human rights organisations. These organisations until then assumed that their role was limited to cooperating with and assisting other political organisations. However, after gaining some degree of autonomy, it became imperative for us in the APCLC to think about whether there was an autonomous field of operation for rights activists. Balagopal expressed this view strongly. He believed that without careful consideration of their practice and theorising it, human rights organisations could not grow and mature.

Rights and Movements

In 1936, Rammanohar Lohia proposed that rights were essentially social in their origin and content. Until the 1980s, it was this understanding that guided most civil rights groups. During the early 1980s, the understanding among civil liberties activists was that they should mobilise to defend the rights of people to mobilise. To this fundamental idea, Balagopal added a new dimension by showing that rights are products of movements. In an unequal society all institutions are unequal or oppressive. People who are oppressed and exploited mobilise against these institutions in quest of a decent life. These mobilisations may be guided by whatever political convictions they may have. But ultimately it is in the wellspring of these movements that rights and democratic values are generated. Particular political movements may be directed against institution of private property, caste, etc. Rights movements should understand all such movements as broadening the democratic space and generative of new norms and values. The rights movement cannot determine which of these institutions should be considered prior or fundamental or determining. It is not for rights organisations to make such determinations. Doing so and focusing exclusively on the right to mobilise in a particular form will limit the field of action for the rights movement.

Balagopal argued forcefully that we must embrace the rights and values generated by each of these movements, protect them and institutionalise them. The human rights movement is only the

essence of various other movements. When people mobilise for rights, it is the responsibility of the rights movement to not just to support the crystallisation of those rights but to ensure that they are institutionalised. In this struggle for institutionalising rights, the movement for rights cannot afford to get caught in the framework of any particular political movement. Rather, the rights movement should work towards keeping alive the opportunities, and concessions in the existing law that make room for these movements and to promote values that create such opportunities. This work requires that rights movements should be in conversation with other forces in society rather than exclusively with movement actors. This is the autonomous field of action for the rights movement. We have to focus on the responsibility to protect democratic institutions that create room for democratic rights and values. In this work, it is necessary for the rights movement not only to be independent from people's movements and political struggles but should be able to criticise such struggles and movements when they are themselves undemocratic.

It is to deepen this understanding that Balagopal declared that the rights movement should have an autonomous perspective, an autonomous responsibility and an autonomous field of work. Balagopal faced many obstacles in establishing this intellectual ground and traditions of practice. But he moved with utter conviction. It is because of this role that he essayed that he became one with all movements. It is this intellectual ground and its evolution from praxis that has strengthened the rights movement in Andhra Pradesh and brought justice to victims. Balagopal insisted that democratically minded people should not simply speak of democracy but practice it. Repression and domination in whatever form they appear must be opposed with conviction, integrity and commitment. Even when people's movements fail to reflect these values in their practice, we must challenge them precisely from that perspective. This is the sum and substance of his work.

It is only when opposition to such views within the civil liberties movement reached a point of no resolution that the

Andhra Pradesh Human Rights Forum (APHRF) was formed. After a few months of uncertainty, this forum began to work on an extensive basis. Most recently, it has challenged the government's efforts to withdraw the rights provided for the poor in the Constitution in name of liberalisation. The forum has especially strongly opposed the destruction and transfer of resources from the poor to the rich taking place in the name of development. It is through this kind of work that APHRF created space in the public sphere to demand livelihoods and bare minimum living conditions as a matter of right for the poor. The APHRF followed Balagopal's formulations in practice. It has become extensive by maintaining a live relationship with many movements. It has grown strong in many districts.

Balagopal recognised that it was difficult to continue this work at a time when people's movements were weakening. This is why he insisted that human rights movements should work with them even more. In retrospect, it seems to me that in articulating these ideas during the most difficult years in the 1990s, Balagopal opened up the space for a debate on Marxism. He did this through several essays. Most notably, his essay in Telugu titled "History, Man and Marxism", the one in EPW in 1995 addressing Sumanta Banerjee on communalism and democratic practice in the aftermath of the Babri Masjid demolition "Democracy and the Fight against Communalism" (7 January 1995) and then in the essay titled "The Darker Side of the Naxalite Strategy" in Telugu. These essays all raised fundamental questions about how Marxism as we knew it addressed (or did not address) the relationship between "being" and "consciousness". His dissatisfaction with Marxism as we knew it then translated into the practice of human rights. It is perhaps due to the limits of history that the questions he raised through those essays had no immediate answers. It is unfortunate that at a time when his efforts were beginning to coalesce into a coherent body of critical praxis that Balagopal himself has left us.

To remember Balagopal now is only to remember our own humanness and the conditions under which we struggle for a better life for everyone.